

Managing Stress

Most students experience some degree of anxiety some time during their course of study, particularly at exam time. Because anxiety is caused by the way we interpret and react to events, anxiety can be managed by using a combination of three different actions: managing your thoughts, managing your behaviour, and managing your physical response to fear.

What causes anxiety?

We often think we become anxious and stressed because of what is happening to us. In fact, anxiety is caused by the way we interpret and react to events. The thought that something is going to be very threatening will be enough to prompt the alarm reaction. However, because the danger is **imagined**, the body cannot properly deal with the danger by fighting it or running away from it. Instead, the alarm reaction remains, and the sufferer begins to look like an anxious person.

There are many and varied signs of excess anxiety. Do you ...

- lie awake worrying?
- find yourself getting frustrated, irritable, moody, tearful?
- get palpitations (pounding heart, accelerated heart rate)?
- experience sweating, trembling, or shaking?
- feel apprehensive and worried?
- feel guilty when you aren't working?
- feel indecisive?
- smoke or drink to 'unwind'?
- experience feelings of panic?
- grit or grind your teeth?
- feel nauseous (upset stomach)?

If you are experiencing some of these signs, you may need to seek help from your doctor, university counsellor, or mentor.

What about exam anxiety?

'Exam anxious' people tell themselves that exams are a danger, and then their bodies react. They cannot fight an exam, and of course most people don't want to run away from an exam as the consequences would be too dramatic! They can, however, change certain thoughts and behaviours to ensure that their anxiety does not reach unhealthy levels.

How to manage exam anxiety positively

Exam anxiety can be managed by using a combination of three different actions: challenging and changing your **thoughts**, changing your **behaviour**, and changing your **physical response** to being scared.

1. Manage your thoughts

Think about your exams. Imagine them being fairly close. What messages do you give yourself (i.e., your thoughts or self-talk) that could be promoting your exam anxiety?

Here are some common anxiety-producing thoughts about exams:

- I won't know enough to pass. I haven't done enough work.
- If I fail, my parents/friends/partner will be disappointed.
- If I fail, I won't be able to face people.
- If I fail, I won't be able to afford to repeat the semester/year.
- If I fail, it will prove that I am no good.

Here are some techniques to help you change your negative thoughts to more positive, productive ones:

- **Say** your positive thoughts over and over out aloud.
- **Write** your positive thoughts on post-its and place them where you can see them regularly.
- Each time a negative thought about the exams comes up, **see** a red flashing light saying **STOP!** Then, replace this thought with more positive statement, stating it out aloud if possible.
- Notice how differently you feel and act when you **think** positive thoughts.

- **Imagine** your negative thoughts in a bizarre context, so they will begin to seem like the unhelpful thoughts they are. For example, imagine your negative thoughts are coming from a yapping dog tied to a tree. Now, shut your eyes, take a few good breaths, and imagine yourself walking past the yapping dog in a strong, dismissive way, paying it no heed.

2. Manage your behaviour

The best way to minimise anxiety before an exam is to be well prepared – avoid last minute cramming. DO whatever makes you feel you are in control of your study. For example:

- Become an independent learner.
- Manage your time.
- Organise your study material.
- Plan your revision.
- Set realistic goals. Remember we're all different.
- Reward yourself when you reach your revision goals.
- Exercise regularly.
- Eat a balanced diet.
- Get adequate sleep (8 hours every night).
- Have a few belly laughs a day.
- Ask for help when necessary.

3. Manage your physical responses

As part of your management of exam anxiety, you need to manage your physical response to anxiety.

When you think you are in danger, the alarm reaction takes over. Physical responses to anxiety include:

- shallow or quickened breath
- clammy hands
- tight muscles
- pursed lips or dry mouth
- flushing
- furrowed brow
- trembling
- pallor.

There are many ways to relax, for example:

- meditation
- centring
- massage
- yoga
- specific home-based activities
- positive image rehearsals.

The three areas (thoughts, behaviours, and physical response) are part of a system. By intervening in one area, the whole system will benefit. Intervening positively in all three areas will speed up your management of exam anxiety.

In the exam – how to manage anxiety

Panicking in the exam is your worst fear! Panicking in an exam will cause your heart rate to increase, you will begin to sweat, and you will have difficulty recalling information. If you feel this happening, use some calming techniques. Practise them so you can employ them with confidence if you begin to feel anxious in the exam room:

- Breathe calmly – Exhale slowly and completely, letting your shoulders relax.
- Use a relaxation exercise. For example, imagine yourself in a calm and beautiful place. Slowly repeat a calming word until you begin to relax.
- Sit upright in your chair, grip the seat of the chair, and tense all your muscles. Then, let your muscles relax totally, breathing out as you do so.
- Think positively – tell yourself 'I CAN do it; I AM well prepared'.
- Answer the easiest questions first – this will help build your confidence, or if you are in the middle of a question, leave the question and come back to it after attempting another question.